

The handsome Neu Century Theater, at left, built in 1898, was razed to make way for Bamberger department store. At right is old Music Hall, originally First Reformed Church, which stood in Market street, on site of Lyric Theater.

A Younger Newark -

DAYS OF STAGE GLORY

IN these days when stage-fans must write months ahead for tickets for Broadway hits, one recalls with nostalgia the years when the legitimate theater flourished in Newark.

Newarkers were slow to develop the habit of theater-going. The Puritan tradition was too strong, the demands of a work-a-day world too pressing, for the native-born Newarker of early days to de- … time to amusement.

Newark's theater history really begins about 100 years ago when Concert Hall was built at the southeast corner of Market and Halsey streets. When it opened in February, 1847, the gas lights with which it was illuminated created quite as much of a stir as the plays that were presented. Gas lights had replaced oil lamps on the city's streets only three months before. Liberal Newarkers supported the new venture and encouraged the organization of a local company which brought in guest stars much as Summer theaters do today.

Although there were no booking firms in those days, Concert Hall began to engage touring companies in 1848. The performances ranged all the way from burlesque to Shakespeare. At the same time occasional dramatic entertainments, both amateur and professional, were given at the various auditoriums in the city, Library Hall, also built in 1847, Washington Hall, Mechanics Hall, and Military Hall.

IN 1866 there came to Newark a couple who gave the city the most brilliant acting it had ever seen. Daniel Waller and his gifted wife Emma … took over Concert Hall, remodeling it and renaming it Waller's Opera House. Newark was ready to appreciate fine acting for the population had grown to 100,000 and the city had received many new settlers from Europe whose enthusiasm for cultural advantages and amusement was contagious. Mrs. Waller's greatest role was that of Meg Merrilies in Scott's "Guy Mannering," but for two years she offered a varied repertory that caused "Standing Room Only" signs to be hung in the old Opera House.

Touring companies played at the Opera House after the Wallers left, and it was eventually renamed the Newark Theater. By 1881 there were two other theaters in Newark, the Park Theater on the North side of West Park street, remodeled from the Park Presbyterian Church whose congregation had moved to Belleville avenue, now Broadway, and the Grand Opera House, rebuilt from a skating rink on the northwest corner of Washington and Marshall streets. In the '80s Fred Waldmann bought the Newark Theater, originally the Concert Hall, renamed it Waldmann's Opera House and … variety shows and musicals.

Newarkers patronized the theater freely at that time and the most prominent actors played at the Grand Opera House and the Park Theater, among them Edwin Booth, Joseph Jefferson and Ada Rehan.

Melodramas such as "Bertha, the Beautiful Sewing Machine Girl" filled the house at the Adacemy of Music where Branford place now cuts Washington street. This playhouse was built in 1852 and was known later as Jacobs' Theater, Blaney's and last, Fox's Washington Theater. It was torn down when Branford place was cut through.

The Neu Century, later called the Empire, was built in 1898 in Washington street

Theater's 'Greats' Acted Here After Opening of First Playhouse in 1847

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on the present site of Bamberger's. First-rate stage attractions, with such stars as David Warfield, Margaret Anglin and DeWolf Hopper, were presented.

A finer playhouse than Newark had ever seen opened in September, 1886, built where the Paramount-Newark now stands by Henry C. Miner, owner of Miner's Bowery Theater in New York. Miner's, later the Newark Theater, saw its grand days as a legitimate theater when it housed celebrities such as Lillian Russell, John Drew, Richard Mansfield, E. H. Sothern and Julia Marlowe, Chauncey Olcott, Maude Adams and all the stars so dearly loved at the time. Andrew Mack, the Irish actor, to the day he died insisted to his fellow actors that the Newark Theater held at least 3,000 people and that he had them standing in the aisles whenever he played Newark.

Stock companies were tremendously popular in the '90s and later. The Grand Opera House, renamed the Columbia, had its own company for four years. Another company under Una Abell was at the New Century Theater. Corse Payton, who had acted here in stock in the '90s, was responsible for the beginning of Newark's greatest era of stock, before World War I which is still vivid in the memory of many Newarkers. They still talk of the 1912-13 run of 84 weeks, minus one month when the actors of his company took a much needed vacation.

Mabel Brownell and Clifford Stork, under Mr. Payton's management, opened in stock at the Newark Theater in 1911. The company moved to a new home when the Orpheum Theater opened in 1912. This playhouse was built by M. S. Schlesinger on the site of Machinery Hall at Washington and Court streets. Miss Brownell later managed her own company at the Orpheum, now the Newark Opera House.

THE company was popular with all classes but particularly with teen-agers, so much so that the high schools and the theater had to clamp down on them on matinee days. Fred Gregory, the ticket seller, got so he knew when they were playing hookey and wouldn't sell them tickets. Eddie Van Sloan and Mabel Estelle of the supporting cast, also were great favorites.

After Miss Brownell and Mr. Stork moved on from the Orpheum the theater housed many other favorite companies and players. Especially popular were the Forsberg Players, including Ethel Clifton, Charles Dingle, currently in "Miss Liberty," John Charles Thomas and Alfred Lunt.

Corse Payton was responsible for the building of a new theater in Branford place on the site of the old burial ground, but it was known only very briefly as the Payton Theater. The opening show was "The Sporting Duchess."

FRANK A. KEENEY then leased the house and it became the Keeney Theater. It was later a vaudeville house, then a legitimate theater operated as the Shubert by Lee and J. J. Shubert. Musical attractions were featured at the Shubert Theater, straight plays being *offered* at the Broad Street Theater.

The Broad Street Theater was opened in 1912 as the Sam S. Shubert. It was managed by Mr. Schlesinger who brought fine companies and excellent actors to Newark—Ethel Barrymore, Sarah Bernhardt, Julia Marlowe, Lionel Barrymore, the Favershams, Forbes-Robertson, Mrs. Fiske, Helen Hayes, George M. Cohan and many others.

Newark's first big-time vaudeville theater, Proctor's, stood on Park place, adjoining the Public Service Terminal. Close your eyes and Eva Tanguay, Yvette and her magic violin, Irene Franklin and all the magic names in old-time vaudeville will troop across your vision, to say nothing of acrobats, trapeze artists and trained dog and seal acts. The new Proctor's Theater, in Market street, was built in 1915. It is now a movie theater.

THE City Theater in North Seventh street, now a movie house, was the home of Maude Fealy's stock company for several seasons in the '20s. Miss Fealy, a noted Shakespearean actress, opened at the Broad with an able supporting cast. Downtown Newarkers enjoyed the company as it played first at the Broad, then at the Orpheum. The Roseville engagement followed.

During the '20s, nearly all the Broadway hits were routed to Newark theaters, but these became fewer and fewer in the depression of the 30s. The appeal of local movie houses and the lure of the New York stage are now so strong that the great days of flesh-and-blood theater in Newark are over.

At least, that is what the old-timers say.


Waldmann's Theater, above, which stood at Market and Halsey streets, was on site of Concert Hall, city's first playhouse, opened in 1847. Below: Blaney's Theater, home of melodramas, yielded to Branford place extension.

